



Different ways of looking

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“Different ways of looking”:

A study of personal, professional and civic rewards from
International work-based learning experiences with
Community Youth Work students at Ulster University,
Northern Ireland.

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Abstract

Northern Ireland is emerging from a 30 year local conflict, with new democratic local structures established and a new landscape for civic engagement. Community Youth Workers are well positioned to nurture these new political and civic structures but after decades of insular living and thinking, global skills and attitudes are acutely needed. This study gauges the extent to which international student placements at Ulster University (UU) can help build a population who are ‘forward and outward-looking’ and how these new perspectives, skills and knowledge can be used in this ‘New’ Northern Ireland.

The study explores the impact of international student placements and their effectiveness of fostering ‘global-ready citizens’. It is proposed that the preparation phase must attend equally to both *the fear* and *the opportunities* within internationalisation that face the departing student. The practical measures of achieving this are assessed and the preparation of students to be ‘*cultural nesters*’ rather than ‘*cultural visitors*’ (in their new context) is also explored. The development of intercultural competence is evaluated against the backdrop of the Community Youth Work profession; to gain insight into how the knowledge, skills and values development of the discipline align with intercultural competence.

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Introduction

International placements have been an optional feature of undergraduate training of Community Youth Work (CYW)ⁱ students at UU for the past 40 years (McCready & Loudon, 2015). These existed in the form of European study visit and placements abroad. In the first two decades, the evolution of these learning opportunities has been less by design and more opportunistic, however, in the past 20 years, formal international partnerships have been established. Currently, the second work placement of three, is now normally located in a country outside of Northern Ireland. Against the backdrop of hard-pressed university resources, this study seeks to build empirical evidence on the impact of international placementsⁱⁱ, for CYW students, on their professional formation and on the internationalisation of their practice.

Rationale for study

The pursuit of the global-ready citizen or global-ready graduate (Paige and Goode, 2009) is a growing expectation of graduate and post-graduate level education. Research in the international work-based context has emerged in some clinical disciplines, particularly nursing (Balandin et al, 2007; Standage & Randal, 2014; Haloburdon & Thompson, 1998; Callister & Cox, 2006). Other research has focused on expeditions or exchange visits with group experience as the dominant event, rather than the integrative or immersive experience (Allison & Von Wald, 2010). Research into social work students undertaking international work placements (Lough et al, 2012), while different in ethos and approach, provides insights useful to the international CYW experience. International research, in focusing attention largely on the student who undertakes an *international university course*, has neglected the evolution of the international *work-based learning* student experience. This study uses the experiences of CYW students on international *work-based learning experiences*, as opposed to the engagement in international *study* experiences, to identify how internationalisation is embedded to a greater or lesser degree.

The Northern Ireland Context

Northern Ireland, is geographically part of a small island, but constitutionally part of the United Kingdom. This small-ness, with a population of approximately 1.85 million people, has led to a general sense that the citizens will benefit from greater connections nationally and internationally. Northern Ireland is emerging from a recent conflict, from the late 1960s till 1998, known as ‘the troubles’. The Good Friday Agreement (Northern Ireland Office, 1998) heralded the beginning of a peace process for

the region, with paramilitary ceasefires, new democratic structures and opportunities for the development of a healthy civil society.

‘The troubles’ have left many psychological marks on the population, including a stubborn parochialism and sectarianism amongst the population, which threatens to keep the Northern Ireland conflict simmering at low-levels for the foreseeable future. The solution most keenly presented is for Northern Ireland to develop into a ‘forward and outward looking region’, a phrase coined by the European Commission as part of their Peace and Reconciliation funding programmes (Youth Council for Northern Ireland, 2015).

This is the backdrop in which international study has developed at UU for CYW students. The development of international placement opportunities was less influenced by ideas and literature on intercultural competence, global citizenship and internationalising the student (Blum & Bourn, 2013; Duffy et al, 1999; Standage & Randall, 2014; Allison & Von Wald, 2010). Its development relates to the rewards which international engagement might reap for the Northern Ireland peace-building agenda.

The international platform offers a way in which people from Northern Ireland can find new perspectives on growing up in a conflict society and can bring ‘home’ new skills and models towards citizenship and conflict transformation, while also returning with international stories to tell, of new peoples and communities, which hold equal weight and pain..

Furthermore, the demographics of the Northern Ireland population are expanding to reflect multi-cultural and multi-racial diversity. These new communities and ethnic diversity require CYW professionals to be adaptable and responsive to a range of needs. The international work placement experience is an opportunity to develop professional inter-cultural skills abroad, for direct transferability to the local multi-cultural context (Fenton, 1997, cited in Grant and McKenna, 2003).

Methodology

This qualitative and quantitative study has used purposive sampling in targeting current and previous Ulster University CYW students who have undertaken international work placements. A questionnaire was distributed by survey monkey to 60 ex-students, with a response made by 39 respondents. All respondents had completed a 10 week placement in either SYFS or Boys’ town in Australia. Through the use of SPSS, the quantitative data was analysed using frequency and cross tabulation. Respondents made effective use of open-ended questions to develop arguments and provide views and opinions. The themes were contextualised by data collated from three semi-structured interviews with Chief Executives and

practice teachers from international work-placement agencies and 4 focus groups of students and ex-students, at pre- and post- stages of their international experience. The total sample of respondents is 69.

Profile of international work-based learning experiences

Three English-speaking countries are currently used for International placements for students of UU's BSc in Community Youth Work – South Africa, USA and Australia. In Youth for Christ, Durban, South Africa, students work in orphanages, with street-connected children, on HIV and AIDS programmes or in drug rehabilitation programme. Two agencies in Australia, Southern Youth and Family Servicesⁱⁱⁱ and Dunlea, feature prominently, offering on-site accommodation to students and work experiences either in a large homelessness agency or an alternative education project. Placements in Chicago, Illinois are in youth justice, probation agencies, or residential units for young people with substance addictions. All three sites offer culturally distinct practices in working with young people and organisational cultures, reflective of their respective geographies and socio-economic contexts.

Managing the fears of the 'international' experience

Maslow's (1943, 1954) hierarchy of needs proposes that in order to motivate people, basic human needs must be met before an individual will focus on a 'higher' need. Issues of physical comfort, warmth, hunger and thirst alongside the need for safety and security all need to be addressed. To achieve a set of 'higher' cognitive or self-actualising goals, attention is needed to develop and maintain an environment that feels secure and promotes growth and wellbeing. For the student embarking on an international placement this means addressing the fears and practical issues to unburden the learner from anxiety and conditions that might hamper the journey.

Preparing to negotiate through difference and diversity is more often than not about mastering a fear of the unknown and fear of a new setting (Kleehammer et al, 1990; Yong, 1996). The international experience offers a useful vehicle through which strategies to master fears can be tested. Illustrative of this are the continuous references from secondary research sources, to navigation and transport issues within the work placement experience (Root and Ngampornchai, 2013). This relates to a combination of mastery including knowledge of the transport system, possible language and money skills, time-keeping and fear of the unknown. Cooke (1996) identified the levels of anxiety felt by students faced with complex and challenging clinical work experience situations. The fear of making mistakes amongst new colleagues might lead to others forming a negative opinion of the student's competence. This fear is a

naturally-occurring one, in any new setting, irrespective of the international dimension. Survival language skills and basic living skills (Root and Ngampornchai, 2013) similarly evolve within the international student experience, whereby students comment on how they have managed to learn to cook, live in crowded spaces, wash and clean and exchange money. One respondent remarked:

'I have always lived with my mum and I have always had a free meal on the table but over there I was able to go out and cook my own food and do my own washing' (Student 8)

The impact of fear and instability can mean that survival is the focus for the learner rather than extracting deep learning from the process (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

Measures to address fears and insecurity

Pre-departure training has been criticised for the over-emphasis on practical measures and logistics of travel and arrangements (Root and Ngampornchai, 2012; Paige and Goode, 2009). This perspective, however lacks due consideration for Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

In this study there were a number of pre-departure practical considerations. The main issues were cost and visa applications. Finance was a prime determinant as to whether a student could shoulder the cost of going overseas for 10 weeks (or more). Whilst accommodation was provided (for at least 34 respondents) students had to incur cost of travel, food and spending money:

'The cost was a difficult factor in the process' (Student 12)

Visa processing generated much attention and anxiety in the pre-departure phase:

'The application process for applying for visas was quite stressful' (Student 6)

'At one stage I thought I wasn't going because we had problems with the visa' (Student 15)

Once the students arrived at their international destination, placement providers continued to address the needs of students, beginning at Maslow's lower level, building towards higher ground. This continued care and support is not accidental but the outworkings of much groundwork and investment in these relationships, built on mutual trust and mutual benefit, which were crucial for a strong partnership:

'There is a relationship with the university and ourselves and there is trust' (Practice Teacher 1)

'I think there is something about (the university) having a relationship with the Head of the agency. There is an ongoing relationship' (CEO)

'We have seen your place of work and you have seen ours-so everyone understands where each is coming from' (Practice Teacher 4)

Respondents outlined the role of the placement provider in offering support with homesickness and, where appropriate, using this discomfort, as a learning opportunity, to build greater resilience:

'I did find it very challenging. I was very homesick when I got to Australia but my practice teacher and colleagues helped me. I learned so much about myself as a person and grew really strong with the experience' (Student 24)

'She even surprised herself because she thought she was going to be very homesick and she just got into it and felt really at home' (Practice Teacher 3)

Not all students were able to overcome their homesickness but the support of the placement provider to resolve this difficult situation became more important in these circumstances:

'We had an unfortunate experience last year with a student who came and left within the first couple of weeks and I think it was just homesickness because it was the other side of the world' (Practice Teacher 1)

The measures needed to maintain a secure international learning environment and holistic student-centred support lie in building a strong triad of support between student, placement provider and university staff. This factor is commonly known, but rarely achieved.

Beyond survival – maximising the opportunity of the international experience

For the student, the challenge is to move beyond fear and survival and to see the opportunities for personal and professional development. This paradox of fear and opportunity is a central feature of international work. Threat lies primarily in the personal and social vulnerability one might feel from how 'globalisation' can intrude into 'one's world'. Fear can escalate based on the suspicion of difference and diversity (Dunn et al, 2004; Schultz et al, 2009).

Educators' main aims are with broadening the knowledge and skills base of students to equip them for leadership in national and international settings (Grant and McKenna, 2003). Central to building this leadership role is in scrutinising different practice delivery and exploring the effectiveness and quality of intervention in a new cultural backdrop (Goldberg and Brancato, 1998). To achieve this global-ready worker, higher education is increasingly being driven towards the '*internationalisation of the curriculum*' (Rizvi and Walsh, 1998; Haigh, 2002) whereby curriculum developments align with global developments

and themes. The driving vision is to build a '*culture of innovation, embracing new directions, ideas and opportunities*' (Grant and McKenna, 2003)

Study participants reported widening of perspectives through exposure to new cultural situations that may challenge personal and professional values:

"I think there is racism in both countries but I think there are different ways of looking at it. So I think the experience of seeing how we treat our indigenous people... those sorts of things are useful for them to learn." (Practice Teacher 3)

Techniques, work practices and professional approaches form part of the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are returned to the work context of Northern Ireland. Although many of these are not new processes, their application within mainstream youth work may not have been encountered by students until this point:

"We may work alongside a young person and try to get them to reduce how much pot they are smoking. We don't have a policy of 'just cut it out' which I guess can be a new concept if you have never been exposed to drug and alcohol use". (Practice Teacher 1)

A key driving vision for the internationalisation of the CYW student is the changing face of the Northern Ireland demographic. With a growing multi-cultural population, the need to adapt current skills, knowledge and attitudes to a more inclusive perspective becomes paramount. The international placement is intended to expand the repertoire of the CYW graduate, for this new world:

"I enjoyed every aspect of my placement, but particularly enjoyed experiencing the different cultures." (Student 13)

and

"I think my placement in Australia made me a youth worker. It opened my eyes to new ideas and ways that youth workers can bring back to their practice here in Northern Ireland." (Student 14)

This exposure to new systems and approaches is a key feature of the study with implications for developing empowering and innovative practices in their local context.

[Aligning Intercultural Competence with the discipline of Community Youth Work](#)

The development of intercultural competence for international student experiences has become an accepted threshold concept for higher education institutions. For some students and academics, this will

necessitate additional pre-departure preparation. This paper posits that the CYW discipline is closely aligned to the key components of intercultural competence and that all preparation for the international experience is embedded in the professional formation training of both practice and theory modules of UU CYW course.

Intercultural competence is a disputed term (Deardorff, 2006) with definitions varying in tone and emphasis. Byram (1997) identified the highest-rated definition of intercultural competence as:

'Knowledge, of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs and behaviours'.

Deardorff (2004) proposed that intercultural competence is defined as:

'The ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes'.

Recurring elements emerge across the field of intercultural competence, which point to some broad agreement on the priorities and factors which interact for effective intercultural competence (Root and Ngampornchai, 2013; Deardorff, 2006; Grant and McKenna, 2003). Statements which received 85% or more agreement (Deardorff, 2006) contain common features such as:

'... the ability to shift one's frame of reference appropriately, the ability to achieve one's goals to some degree, and behaving appropriately and effectively in intercultural situations'. (Deardorff, 2006)

The use of the phrase 'intercultural perspective' is indicative of a wider set of elements at play with cognitive skills combining with perspective and attitudinal adjustments and expectations - 'the understanding of others' world views' (Deardorff, 2006). Where connections are made between these perceptions and behaviours, students develop a more sophisticated awareness of self and the impact of self on others.

Spitzberg (1989) describes 'appropriate' or 'effective' responses as those actions that don't violate cultural rules and build towards achieving specific objectives – whereby no harm is caused and the intervention has the potential for empathic understanding to be shown and grown (Rogers, 1980).

Community youth work uses a similar framework in developing professional skills that are applicable within 'settings of complexity and ambiguity' (Roberts, 2009). Henry et al (2010) describe the development of effective interpersonal relationships as a driving methodology for community youth work practice which requires *'the balance of three components: knowledge acquisition; skills development and*

self-awareness raising (knowledge, skills and values)'. Similar to intercultural competence, the value of knowledge-based learning, is most useful when combined with skills and attitudinal competence.

Professional development across skills, knowledge and values

Noticing and locating the self is a central concept in reflective interpersonal professions, be they clinical or community-based (McCabe & Timmons, 2013, 195-217; Burnard, 2002, 4-44; Wood et al, 2015, 26-40). This self-awareness is best understood within two interlinked strands – firstly, a self-awareness that considers how our sense of self can impact on ourselves; secondly, the impact of self on others particularly in interpersonal interventions and connections. Both are needed for professional competence across a range of local and international settings. The impact of self on others features consistently in the field of intercultural competence and intercultural communication, with a growing understanding of the intersection of skills, knowledge and attitudinal perspectives. For respondents of this study, growth in self-awareness, and personal and professional development were significant:

35 participants (92.1%) felt their self-awareness had increased;

23 (60.5%) felt they had improved as a reflective practitioner;

26 (68.4%) felt more competent as a CYW practitioner.

The power of the personal and professional journey as being transformative is referred to by participants repeatedly. Participants described the interwoven work and personal moments which enabled them to become more confident, articulate and resourceful practitioners:

'I worked with homeless young people and it really enhanced my confidence and communication skills'
(Student 20)

'It was a massive developmental experience not just for my work but for life, improving my self-confidence' (Student 14)

'A completely new and different experience which impacted positively on my personal and professional development' (Student 9)

A practice teacher noted the connections between personal and professional development:

'I think their personal stuff is probably more outstanding than their professional growth but without the personal growth then the professional growth does not occur'

(Practice Teacher 3)

There is no causal link of personal development leading to professional development, however, there are indicators that both are intertwined and inextricably linked. The adjacency of personal and professional development is best understood looking through the intercultural lens of knowledge acquisition, skills development and values exploration.

In terms of **knowledge**, study participants illustrate how theories have been extracted from the teaching and applied to the international context:

'I think the TA (transactional analysis) that we learned is really useful even outside of youth work.'
(Student 19)

The **skills** of the profession, that are inherent in inter-cultural competence, include communication and developing boundaries and respect:

'Here you are shown how to be really professional, knowing boundaries and relationships between workers, your boss and the young people.' (Student 15)

Values exploration presents as a centre-point through which skills development, behaviours and knowledge are filtered. Lynch and Hanson (1998) proposes that knowledge of cultural situations and norms is less of a driver than attitude:

'After all the books have been read and the skills learned and practised, the cross-cultural effectiveness of each of us will vary. And it will vary more by what we bring to the learning than by what we have learned'.

Cultural empathy as a route to 'Cultural nesting'

For community youth workers to facilitate a person's 'actualising tendency' (Kirshenbaum and Henderson, 1997 cited in Henry et al, 2010), the approach is based on the worker creating three core conditions; congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathy. For respondents, the development of cultural empathy builds on and extends this empathy, using their own lived experiences to understand and appreciate new settings:

'The aborigine issue is a big one and it was good to compare and see similarities (with Northern Ireland) where there is hatred. It is a different topic but the same anger'. (Student 9)

and

'I found that removing myself from the Northern Ireland context was highly useful as I got to see the social issues which are prominent in Australia; for example, the indigenous communities and the social disadvantages which minorities face'. (Student 10)

More often than not, this development of cultural empathy was an outcome of building new cultural knowledge:

'I wasn't really aware of the indigenous people but I was able to make an analysis of what was happening in Australia. I took a real interest into that cultural aspect of Australia and I enjoyed looking into its history' (Student 5).

A concern remains that students develop a limited or surface cultural empathy for the new environment, rather than a deeply-felt identification for new peoples and places. The question of whether students are more akin to *'cultural visitors'* than *'cultural nesters'* remains, with students making reference to cultural experiences rather than deeply immersive cultural living:

'We participated in an aboriginal day – you got to paint Aboriginal art and watch people play didgeridoos and dancing'. (Student 12).

Goode (2008) points out that pre-departure training often lacks intercultural understanding and specific teaching on inter-cultural competence in preparation for the international experience is found to be wanting (Minucci, 2008 cited in Root and Ngampornchai, 2012; Paige and Goode, 2009; Goode, 2008). Respondents in this study would concur:

'A bit more information around the cultural differences (such as aborigines) and learn more background, before you go, from the University.... that would have been more helpful'. (Student 10)

Yet, a doubt remains amongst the placement providers on whether it is *ever* possible to prepare for the extreme cultural differences that students face:

'There is probably no preparation you can give someone for this kind of placement' (CEO)

Earliest theories of acculturative stress suggested that a period of shock was a normal part of the initial adjustment to a new culture (Lysgaard, 1955), followed by a steady recovery whereby individuals began to immerse themselves in the host culture and to acquire culturally relevant knowledge. The professional development of respondents attests to this U-curve hypothesis.

'Going to Australia was the first time I was ever away from home for any length of time and it really helped me develop my own independence and confidence' (Student 25)

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study points to the close alignment of the discipline of Community Youth Work with intercultural competence. The skills of the profession are those that are inherent in intercultural competence and students who make these connections have a greater chance of becoming *cultural nesters* as opposed to *cultural visitors*. The power of this journey towards *cultural nesting* (as being transformative) is referred to by participants, articulating deep cultural empathy and insights into new people and places, through the personal and professional journey.

Since 2000 there has been approximately 200 UU student placements in South Africa, Australia and the United States. The context of Northern Ireland is the backdrop for these students, with the International placement offers a new perspective on citizenship and nation-building. The local vision is that students bring new perspectives and insights that can build a strong civic society within Northern Ireland. Wilson (2015) understands and articulates the role of youth work in building democracies and nations through intercultural understanding. He proposes that:

‘Sustaining meetings between different others, and promoting inter cultural understanding, must be a central mental model in youth work practice’ and that *‘Restoring citizenship, whatever our political identity-is a youth work task’*.

Wilson (2015) proposes a model of how community youth work can build citizenship and lively democracies. This points to the outcomes of Community Youth Work which are to:

‘Build a civil society, to sustain dialogue (which has healing opportunities) and to promote inter-culturality (which embraces a new world)’.

Ultimately these actions will promote and grow inter-dependence, a concept much needed within peace-building in Northern Ireland. The impact of the internationalisation process on CYW students fits within this role. (3987 words).

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NOTES:

ⁱ CYW is an abbreviation for Community Youth Work, used throughout this article.

ⁱⁱ The phrase 'international placements' is used throughout this article interchangeably with 'international work-based learning student experience'.

ⁱⁱⁱ Southern Youth and Family Services, Australia was awarded Placement of the Year (2012) by Ulster University in recognition of its contribution towards professional formation for would-be graduates and a strong learning partnership with the Community youth work team.